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"Nothing, Nothing, Nothing": Dostoevsky and Existentialism

Abstract

The paper attempts to situate the work of Fyodor Dostoevsky in the tradition of Russian existentialism, and to indicate his influence on the subsequent development of existentialism in its ontological or ethical guise. In fact, Dostoevsky may be seen as the originator of a tradition which will later on influence and be taken up, via Nietzsche and Shestov, by the figures like Emanuel Levinas, Albert Camus or Maurice Blanchot, all explicitly concerned with existentialist questions of debt, guilt or suicide (Kirilov). Dostoevsky's writings are also interpreted in relation to Russian nationalism, and the sense of Russian Messianic election, which at the end of Crime and Punishment coalesce in another destination for Raskolnikov, launching him towards a Messianic future prior to the Abrahamic time and monotheistic sacrificiality. The end of Crime and Punishment imagines another existence for Raskolnikov, before the religious history, or the history tout court, has taken place or time. That time space is akin to something that Jacques Derrida formulated as an advent of an event to-come, a-venir. Dostoevsky is thus, in our interpretation, both a progenitor of the important strains of existentialism, but also a writer returning his hero's existence to an advent of a completely other, time before time, yet to come.

Keywords: Dostoevsky, Camus, Blanchot, Russian Existentialism, French Existentialism, Russian nationalism, Messianism, Abrahamic Time

*Yes, verily, Russia is a rare example of the pure phenomenon of Being.
Anything can happen, because here, there is--nothing.*

Merab Mamardashvili

*The relationship of human life to the living, right down to their total destruction,
the immeasurable abyss of the crater from which mighty energies might
one day be released on a grand human scale – this is the hope of the Russian nation.*

Walter Benjamin

Learning Russian: "An Existential Decision"

In one of his posthumously published notes, dedicated to Dostoevsky, but formulated as a universal statement about Russian existence, one of the greatest 20th century philosophers writing in Russian, Merab Mamardashvili, wrote the words that serve as the epigraph to this article: everything is possible in Russia, it *exists* in pure form as an expression

of Being, because there, in Russia, there is nothing. This statement comes after a long history of Russian nihilism which was formative of its culture and which, as the above quote testifies, articulates the philosophical thought and one would presume the existential experience in Russia well into the late 20th century, and to the present day. A few years ago, at a conference held in Parnu, Estonia, to discuss Russian post-modernism, Helen Petrovska, a leading Russian philosopher and a student of Merab Mamardashvili, answered a question from the audience, "Why do foreigners learn the Russian language?" with the following, albeit humorous, proposition: "One does not simply learn Russian, it is an existential decision!" Where does this perception on the part of the leading Russian thinkers – in a long line of Russian and not only Russian intellectuals, about Russia as the country where nothing nothings, to speak like Heidegger, come from? Why did Walter Benjamin, as quoted above, choose to write about Dostoevsky's *Idiot* in 1917, and reflect on "total destruction" as "the hope of the Russian nation"? Are Russians the only, the unique people who purely or solely exist to exist, finding the fulfillment in hopeful destruction and annihilation? What would that mean?

The question as posed above requires a further qualification before answering the provenance of its history. Is the question of existence localizable; is existence something that belongs more to some collective bodies, groups or nations, and less to others? How is it possible that Russia appears as a space that harbors "pure Being," and wherefrom that conviction on the part of one of its most sophisticated minds, like Merab Mamardashvili, or philosophers sympathetic to it, like Walter Benjamin? Is being, existence localizable, does it exist somewhere more than at another place, or, if existence itself gives place to existents, what is it particularly in Russia that makes it the most existential country, the one where Being appears in its purity ("pure phenomenon")?

The geopolitics of Being is something that has concerned thinkers of existence in the 20th century, most notably Martin Heidegger. As is well known, in his writings Heidegger perceived that Germany is an inheritor of Greek thought, which stands closest to Being as originarily thought and experienced by pre-Socratic philosophers. In his "Letter on Humanism," for example, Heidegger proposes to think the "universal" aspects, humanistic aspects of Being which do not belong to any geopolitical determination: "Thinking conducts historical existence, that is, *humanitas* of *homo humanus*, into the realm of upsurge of healing" (Heidegger, 1998, 272). But even in this thinking of humanism and/as ontology, we find recourse to German geopolitics as the site of "therefore essentially more primordial" humanism and existence, curiously, again, related to "the young Germans," marked by an alterity and difference from "typical Germans," by an experience of death, a difference that for Heidegger is inevitably "Greek": "For the same reason Hölderlin's relation to Greek civilization is something other than humanism. When confronted with death, therefore,

those young Germans who knew about Hölderlin lived and thought something other than what the public held to be typical German attitude" (Heidegger 1998, 258). A few years before, in 1942, Heidegger thinks "the essence of Western humankind" in proximity to such toponyms as the Danube (in Hölderlin's poem "Der Ister"), or "Herta" which is the "Germanic name of mother earth" (Heidegger, 1996, 43). We only note here a troubling geopolitical and philosophical implications of Heidegger's ontology, to indicate a recourse to a certain determined and nationally marked geography in articulation of the question of Being¹. On the other hand, writing in 1945, in his famous lecture on *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre imagines a universal dimension of existentialism which does not depend on a locality, but has, "as a point of departure no other truth than this: *I think therefore I am*" (Sartre, 2007, 40). Sartre, thus, grounds his notion of existentialism by using and at once deviating from Heidegger, partly in the tradition of enlightenment and transcendental universalism. In Sartre's famous lecture, nothing is "French" about existence and existentialism, not by far. We leave aside the famous Heidegger-Sartre debate, only to signal, again, a tension in the very tradition of existentialism, as pertains to its national markers or belonging. But in this aporia, Russia, as it turns out, may be seen as both the site of a national allegiance to Being, "because there, there is – nothing," a singular and exemplary experience of pure existence called "Russian," and a home or provenance of a universal mode of Being. Paradoxically, this seems to also be a site where existentialism, when it met with the Russian Revolution of 1917 (Benjamin's "human life and the living, exposed right down to their total destruction, the hope of the Russian nation," Benjamin, 1996, 81), which was a coupling of a version of Messianism and communism, found its most universal or universalist (and in the "real," historical terms, internationalist) reach. How did Russia get there, where there is nothing, and where, in ways that to Mamardashvili seem more pure than any other, it IS, it exists or one exists in the closest proximity to Being? In a word, again, do Russians exist (not?) to exist?

Russian Nihilism, the First Nothing

Where did the nothing "at work" in Russia come from? In his seminal essay "Russia as the Unconscious of the West," written in 1989, Boris Groys elaborated on the psycho-geopolitics of Russian nihilism. It is in the 19th century that Russians radically experienced their sense of being superfluous and irrelevant in the general schema of post-Hegelian

¹ On the topic of Heidegger's 1942 Seminar on the Danube and Hölderlin, as well as its implications for thinking about the Holocaust, I take the liberty to refer to my essay about it: "Against the Stream: The Danube, the Video, and the Nonbiodegradables of Europe." (Kujundžić 2016). I also discussed it in my documentary film, *Frozen Time, Liquid Memories* (Kujundžić 2015).

world history. The modernist reforms of Peter the Great at the beginning of the 18th century colonized Russia from within in a radical way. In order to compete with other European countries, Peter the Great unleashed modernist forces and accelerated Russian history, which forever since have been felt as an aggression against the body of Russia. In the 18th century, during the era of Enlightenment, the reforms of Peter the Great were in general still perceived by the intellectual elite as something positive, worthy of celebration, since the intellectual elite (Kantemir, Lomonosov, Karamzin, etc) was in itself made by these modernist reforms and was of the same ilk as the Western philosophers of the Enlightenment (who, incidentally, like Diderot, for example, paid visits to Russia, held correspondence with some of its emperors, etc). After the French Revolution, and after the exposure to Hegelian philosophy, Russia found itself in a curious position. Following the program of the Enlightenment was not feasible for political reasons. It had to abandon an attempt to be enlightened in favor of becoming an original, autochthonous culture, in order to become a nation state among others. At that moment, which will have profound reverberation in Russian history, Russians faced the question of what, in particular, they had to contribute to the family of European nations which was original. The answer they faced was – nothing. "Russia did not find its place in Western post-historicity," writes Groys (Groys 1993, 252).

The first philosopher to reflect on Russian politico-historical identity in the 19th century was Pyotr Chaadaev. "Russia as a philosophical theme was discovered, it is well known, by Chaadaev" (Groys, 1993, 245). In his *Philosophical Letters* and in his famous *Apology of a Madman* written in 1836 (about Peter the Great), Chaadaev described this process of self-colonizing forces which annihilated Russian national identity. At the entrance into World History, Russia faced profound emptiness, it faced nothingness. The schizophrenic rhythm between the empty national identity and the experience of self-colonization by means of which Russia acquires its history qua modernization has been likened to madness in Chaadaev's *Apology of a Madman*. Prior to the Petrine reforms, Russia had no history, and "Peter the Great found in his country only a blank sheet of paper; on it he wrote: 'Europe and the West.'" (Chaadaev 1969, 167) Russia acquired its identity literally by obliterating its national or historical past. That is why the Petrine tradition represents the most dramatic fold (French: *pli*; Latin *plicare*, to fold), an ordinary complication, the folding of a sheet of blank paper, the edges of which constitute the first, or if not the first, then the most radical (self) colonial cut.

Indeed, it is not the first self-colonial impulse in Russian history. The very origin of the Russian nation is tied to the invitation to Novgorod of Riurik, a northern, Scandinavian prince, to impose his rule onto the warring factions of Russian princes, in 862, in order to unify and protect them. The first, primordial impulse of self-colonization introduced a fissure, an uncertainty in Russian identity. This invitation, according to James Billington, the

author of *The Icon and the Axe*, "prepared the way for the tradition of 'false pretenders'" which launched Russia towards a "long, losing struggle" related to the internal religious wars (Billington 1970, 46). The history of "false pretenders" profoundly affected Russian genealogical, patrilinear certainty, leading to the "Times of Troubles" (Billington 1970, 46). I am only signaling the hinge of the self-colonizing gesture that inhabits Russian identity from within and, from the earliest times, divides or haunts Russian national genealogy. It is this uncertainty that will be radically accelerated during the Petrine period. Russian history could be read then as a "long, losing struggle" to come to terms with this self-imposed colonization, dictating all the contradictory, violent impulses of its schizoid historical unfolding, its pulsing between the messianic promise, "the icon," and the nihilistic violence of (self) mutilation, "the axe": a schism captured by the name of Raskolnikov (*Raskol* in Russian means schism).

After its entrance into history by means of the Petrine modernization, Russia is forever colonized, detached from its historical roots, marked by "Europe and the West": when it is born into history, Russia is no more historically. The tillage (*colere, cultus*) left behind this colonial acculturation on the soil of Russia affected its *geo*-political as well as its temporal, historical ("before; after") coordinates or situation. Michael Holquist, in his *Dostoevsky and the Novel*, gives a lapidary formulation of this condition: Russians, "the orphans of time," did not only not know *where* they were, but *when* they were either (Holquist, 1997, 3). This is how Chaadaev describes this dramatic cut into the body of Russia, the tillage of its national soil:

The greatest of our kings, our glory, our demi-god, the one who began a new era for us, to whom we owe all our greatness and all the goods we possess, this king, one hundred years ago, in the presence of the entire world, foreswore the old Russia. With his mighty breath he swept away all our ancient institutions; he dug an abyss between our past and our present, and into it he threw pell-mell all our traditions. He went West himself and made himself the smallest of men, and he returned the greatest among us; he prostrated himself before the West and he arose our master and our law-giver; he introduced into our idiom the idioms of the West; he modeled the characters of our writing on those of the West. Since that time our gaze has been constantly turned to the West; we have breathed nothing but the emanations which came to us from there and fed on them alone. (Chaadaev 1969, 165)

The introduction of modernity is marked by the symbolic prostration of Russia before the West: its utmost debasement and humility. Russia's modernization and entrance "into" history is conditioned upon a certain masochistic desire: Peter the Great, who by contiguity stands for Russia, prostrates himself before the West, and then returns home to reproduce the effects of this submission, as a law (Chaadaev's "master, law-giver"). The tremendous acceleration of Russian history *qua* Petrine modernity was predicated on an internal rift, an

opening to the (colonial) other, which forever unsettled its internal historical rhythm and sense of self-identity. An internal, spiral, self-convoluted wound opened in which the rhythm of progress is felt to unravel simultaneously Russia's identity, a perpetual sado-masochistic (Chaadaev's "prostrate; law") self-colonization and regression. Russia experiences in an exemplary way what Geoffrey Bennington generalizes: "The Nation is, then, always opened to its others: or rather, it is constituted only in that opening, which is, in principle, violent" (Bennington 1990, 131). And that may be the "law" imposed on Russia by Peter the Great, the price Russia has to pay in order to enter the family of European nations. Russia exhausts itself in an immense vigilance over its Western borders, or, more precisely, that self-colonial vigilance (desire/fear) itself holds Russia and becomes its identity (Chaadaev: "since that time our gaze has constantly been turned to the West"). While Russian modernization produced effects that have changed global history (all the way to the cold war, space programs competing with the West, and the arms race), it also calculated or programmed in this process a deconstruction of Russian identity (the most excessive or radical example of which is Soviet communism). This deconstruction, self-debasement, auto-deletion became a condition of its pacing in history, its paradoxical "progress." This is how elsewhere, in one of his *Philosophical Letters*, Chaadaev describes Russia. The title of my essay with the several "nothings" is taken from this paragraph:

Historical experience *does not exist* for us. To behold us it would seem that the general law of mankind has been revoked in our case. Isolated in the world, we have given *nothing* to the world, we have taken *nothing* from the world; we have *not added* a single idea to the mass of human ideas; we have contributed *nothing* to the progress of human spirit. And we have disfigured everything we touched of that progress. From the very first moment of our social existence, *nothing* has emanated from us for the common good of men; *not one useful thought* has sprouted in the sterile soil of our country; *not a single great truth* has sprung from our midst; we *did not* bother to *invent anything*, while from the inventions of others we borrowed only the deceptive appearances [...] (Chaadaev 1969, 41)

We could view the two quotes from Chaadaev as the two brackets or epochs of a historical opening. Two exclusionary, devastating, nihilating, self-mutilating regimes appear on opposite sides as the brackets opening/closing Russian historical temporality: one, the utmost fullness of historical development and modernization, is achieved by means of a submission to and simulation of the other ("we breathed nothing but the emanations which came to us from there [Europe]"); the other, the nothingness of historical identity, an emptiness forever preventing the closure of an identification (a catastrophic, nihilistic cadence reverberates in this second epoch: "nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing"). Providence and history "taught us nothing" (Chaadaev 1969, 41).

Boris Groys assesses Chaadaev's analysis by pointing out the self-destructive forces, a radical void and emptiness opened up by this reflection: "The absence of historical place appears here as a final verdict, since the World Spirit had arrived in German Idealism to its self-reflection; the space of absence and emptiness cannot be filled, the ex-temporality and ex-territoriality of Russia signify its transcendental, eschatological defeat and curse. Chaadaev treated with all philosophical seriousness his discovery of Russia as absolutely Other, absolutely external to thought, as the space of the unconscious" (Groys 248).

Russians responded in a twofold way to this nihilistic opening, to this terrifying void. On the one hand, by radicalizing any discourse of European alterity (nihilism, Marxism), or, on the other, by accelerating and radicalizing specific forms of chiliastic Messianism as a specific form of Russian alterity or "specificity." They responded by a perception that Russia formed, in Groys' formula, "the unconscious of the West," the space without space where all metaphysical values or construct may be reversed, or brought to their teleological conclusion, up to and including their destruction. Because Russia is so backward, empty, void, because it *nothings*, it may become the first, the space where the advent of Being, existence, may find its most radical expression, where Being, because there is nothing, may yet have a future. The situation of Russia appears as a paradoxical being "after," both in the most backward waters of post-historicity, and thus at the same time, ahead of modernity and world history, *after* it, at once.²

Vasily Rozanov, probably the most famous commentator of Dostoevsky's *Legend of the Grand Inquisitor*, captured this epochality of Russia as the space where the chiliastic, evangelic message of Christianity will find its conclusion, in a teleological and theological movement predicated on a nihilistic premise. In *The Legend*, Dostoevsky posits a binarism, and juxtaposes the West in the figure of a Spanish Inquisitor, and Christ who is superimposed on Alyosha Karamazov, the Russian Christ. In his celebrated commentary, Rozanov, repeating Dostoevsky's narrative, writes that Russians, "have nothing, neither lofty spiritual

² For an excellent analysis of Russian spatio-temporality in relation to nihilism, and for the discussion of the role of negativity in the Revolution, see the recent book by Artemy Magun, *Otritsatelnaia revoliutsiia. K dekonstruktsii politicheskogo subekta*, [The Negative Revolution. Towards a Deconstruction of the Political Subject], Sankt Peterburg: European University, 2008; the French version has been published as *La Revolution Negative, Deconstruction du Sujet Politique*, Paris: Edition Harmattan, 2009. For the analysis of Russian spatio-temporality as being "after" history in relation to Friedrich Nietzsche, I take the liberty to refer to my *The Returns of History: Russian Nietzscheans After Modernity*, New York: SUNY Press, 1997. I analyzed the notion of parody and laughter in Dostoevsky and Nietzsche via Bakhtin and Derrida in my "Laughter as Otherness in Bakhtin and Derrida" in *Bakhtin and Otherness*. Ed. M. Holquist. *Social Discourse/Discours Social*, (Toronto: McGill University), Fall 1990.

feats, nor the glitter of intellectual achievements" (Rozanov, 1972, 205). And it is thus that Russia is destined to be the place "to carry out the important task" of introducing evangelical harmony into life and history (Rozanov, 1972, 200). In his later work *The Apocalypse of Our Time*, by contrast, he perceives Russia as the place where nothing has its radical sway: "Nihilism [...] Yes, this is nihilism – the name the Russian long ago baptized himself by [...] Who are you, wandering there through the world? I'm a nihilist" (Rozanov, 1972, 228).

And this unstable, radical oscillation, (a revolving or revolution) appears between a sense of nihilistic emptiness, and the chiliastic advent of the Apocalypse, but here on earth, in the country called Russia (or in its secular version, in the Russian/Soviet Revolution of 1917). These two predicaments of radical nihilism and radical plenitude of existence *sometimes bundled in one and indiscernible, brought to the point of aporetic breaking*, have opened up the space for some of the most powerful pages written in the history of literature. Without this context, a large number of classical texts in Russian literature cannot be properly understood. This aporetic structure of Russian existence in deconstruction and desistance, called by this nihilistic void, has been captured by no one as radically and powerfully as by Fyodor Dostoevsky.

An Axe to Grind

Nowhere is this spatio-temporal aporia, or radical revolution of spatio-temporality (before time/space-after time/space) bordering on the Apocalypse (and ultimately, in "real" historical terms, leading to the Soviet Revolution of 1917), more radically explored than in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. The entire novel enacts the description of nihilism formulated by Chaadev and Mamardashvili: the profound nihilism of Russian culture opens Russia up to the radicalization of all discourses of identity, including and leading to their reevaluation, deconstruction and destruction. *Crime and Punishment* explores the destruction of various politico-philosophical discourses coming from the West, only to discard them for a version of Russian chiliastic Messianism. But that does not suffice either. As we shall see, even that is brought to its annihilation and reversal at the end of the novel, which, in this reevaluation of all values, thinks or posits something like pure futurity, the advent of Being, because in Russia there is nothing.

In *Crime and Punishment* (1865-66) Raskolnikov enters the space of St. Petersburg which is already littered with the post-historical waste and nihilation of the Petrine reforms: "the slaked lime everywhere, the scaffolding, the bricks, the dust and that distinctive summer aroma, so familiar to every inhabitant of St. Petersburg (...) the sad and loathsome coloring of the scene" (Dostoevsky 1991, 34). The space actually oscillates between building (the "pre-" of its history) and the decaying aftermath (rot, sewers, the decline of the

West, the "distinctive aroma" of the rotting of history). Raskolnikov is additionally marked by this history as a latecomer, "heavily in debt to his landlady" (Dostoevsky 1991, 33), that is, coming after it and indebted to its effects. The novel proceeds as a retroactive paradigm of the making of the city, Raskolnikov being a symptom of this phantasmatic production and its phantomatic economy (or its debt to history). Again, we could say of *Crime and Punishment* that it never starts, but incessantly folds onto itself, beginning as the spectral return of a threatening alterity, as a payback of the debt to the destructive and nihilistic other. Marked by a German hat ("Hey you – German hatter," Dostoevsky 1991, 35), thus the figure of a Hegelian philosopher after the French Revolution (as we shall see, the word "dialectics" will explicitly appear in the crucial concluding paragraphs of the novel), and obsessed with "doing something new, saying a new word that hasn't been said before" (Dostoevsky 1991, 35), Raskolnikov enacts the primordial crime of modernization, technological displacement (Heidegger's *Ge-stell*) or the division of Russian identity. His axe (in Russian: "topor"), "ready to hand," is probably the most famous prosthetic device in the history of Russian literature and culture, slicing it in half (literally) and enacting a symbolic, political and historical castration. Raskolnikov's modernist, technological phantasm actually relies heavily on the scrambled temporality conditioned by the "essence of technology" as understood by Martin Heidegger in "The Question Concerning Technology": "Modern technology, which for chronological reckoning is the later, is, from the point of view of the essence holding sway within it, the historically earlier" (Heidegger 1977, 22). What sends Raskolnikov on his way is this arche-teleology of the technological, preceding history, but in which the "essence of all [Russian--DK] history is determined" (Heidegger 1977, 24). The novel unfolds by revolving in a frustrated, self-destructive violence of a primitive but effective *techne*, it is a novel which is positioned (*Ge-stell*) on the blade of an axe.

Raskolnikov's strolls towards the scene of the crime are important in that respect. He visits the scene of the crime both before, and after it; in itself they constitute significant doublings, returns that lead nowhere, characteristic of this inhibited, folded, *replicated* narrative "progression"; during the visit after the crime he obsessively rings the bell, announcing the motif of mourning and Messianic gathering inasmuch as the first church bell chimes "before" the crime, as we shall see, to announce the sacrificial in technology. Twice as he goes to the scene "before" the crime, the scenery is marked by strong associations with the West and with the Petrine reforms. The first association with the West (in German: *das Abendland* of the "German hatter") is produced by the sunset and the "window to Europe": "The little room into which the young man passed, with its yellow wallpaper, (...) was at that moment brightly illuminated by the *setting sun*. 'So the sun will be shining like this then, too!' ... was the thought that flickered almost unexpectedly through Raskolnikov's

mind" (Dostoevsky 1991, 37, my emphasis). On the second stroll, the Petrine phantasm determines the crime that will follow, as Raskolnikov ponders how he would restructure or build the city: "On his way past Yusupov park he even began to be thoroughly taken up with an imaginary project (...) the construction of tall fountains (...) extending the entire length of the Field of Mars and even possibly connected with the gardens of the Mikhailovsky Palace (...)" (Dostoevsky 1991, 110). Not only is Raskolnikov taken up by a task prominently Petrine (waterworks and the Mars Field *were* built by Peter the Great), but he directly links these associations with the figure of the Bronze Horseman, the equestrian statue of Peter the Great by Rastrelli, located precisely in the park of that very Mikhailovsky Palace which Raskolnikov wants to connect with the Mars Field and which he passes on the way to the crime.

As he is on his way to commit the crime, time itself *accelerates* as a symptom of this technological, modernist dis-placement of Russian identity: "Somewhere a clock beat a single chime. 'What, is it really half-past seven? That's impossible, it must be fast!'" (Dostoevsky 1991, 110). Raskolnikov's reformist phantasms are, of course, the very paradigm of the modernist acceleration of history, and in that sense are not "his," but the phantasms of the other, enacted by or on his instrumentalized body. He is late and hurries up to come just in time to commit the crime, as a double, himself a symptom of the modernist technical reproducibility, himself an iteration, a copy, or a *machine*: "He took the axe right out, swung it up in both hands, barely conscious of what he was doing, and almost without effort, almost *mechanically*, brought the butt of it down on the old woman's head" (Dostoevsky 1991, 114, my emphasis). By bringing out the danger related to technology ("the extreme danger of technology," Heidegger), in this retroactive enactment of Russia's encounter with modernity, Dostoevsky also sets up the fissured (abyssal, self-referential, schizoid – *raskol*, Raskolnikov) scenography of Russian identity, torn in a self-mutilating, or as Heidegger would say, "decisive confrontation" between what is, "on the one hand, akin to the essence of technology [modernization, colonization] and, on the other, fundamentally different from it [stable, self-same national identity]" (Heidegger 1977, 35). Raskolnikov appears as the very political *unconscious* ("barely conscious") of this conflicted identificatory apparatus, its originary trace ("axe," cut) or its mechanical ("almost mechanically," "like an automaton," Dostoevsky 1991, 477) turn, revolution, repetition.

The reverse side of modernist violence is a profound, sacrificial passivity by which Russians (in Dostoevsky's novel, for example) respond to the installing of the colonizing law (Chaadev's Peter prostrate before the West, "master" in Russia). A sado-masochistic supplementary economy generates itself, an ecstasy of suffering, an erotization of the wound (a jubilation not completely alien to Chaadaev), maybe best illustrated by Marmeladov's delirious, orgiastic pleasure in being beaten by his wife: "'But I am not scared of be-

ing beaten (...) I may as well tell you, sir, that not only are such beatings not painful to me – actually I derive pleasure from them (...).' And in a sudden frenzy she grabbed him by the hair and hauled him into the room. Marmeladov himself assisted her exertions by meekly crawling after her on his knees. 'Even this is pleasure to me! Even this is not painful, but is a plea-sure-my-dear-re-spect-ed-sir,' he managed to yelp out as he was shaken by the hair, his forehead actually giving the floor a thump" (Dostoevsky 1991, 56, 58). An alternative, Messianic, post-(pre-?)-historical space opens up in this excessive suffering, in this eroticized wound, setting St. Petersburg as the site of the new church, the figure of transfiguration into the new Jerusalem (the passers-by mock Raskolnikov's penitence at the crossroad: "What it is, lads, is that he's off to Jerusalem (...) kissing the capital city of St. Petersburg and its foundations," (Dostoevsky 1991, 603). Marmeladov, whose name is "Semyon," i.e. Simeon/Simon, appears as this alternative, Petrine figure, its reverse or double, St. Peter's lay name. And he draws *twelve* mourners to his funeral meal, the Last Supper!

Marmeladov's first name is given only obliquely, almost secretly, when he refers to his daughter as "Sophia Semyonovna." The usage of the patronymic reveals his first name. The etymology of his first name is highly significant, referring back to two possible biblical sources. In Luke 2 there is a Simeon, "who would not see death until he had seen the Lord's Messiah" (Luke 2, 26). And, of course, of paramount importance for the topography of St. Petersburg, there is "Simon, son of Jonah," who is "Peter, the rock; and on this rock I will build my church" (Matthew 16, 17). Both Simeon and Simon are derivatives of the Hebraic *shama*, like in the solemn prayer, *Shema Israel!, O, Hear, Israel!*, which gives the etymologically equivalent proper name *Shimon* (Petrovsky, 1980, 198-201). This divided reference gathers, as if in a terrible secret, in Marmeladov's sacrificed body, both the testimonial and the Messianic promise.

In addition, his funeral meal is set up as "the Last Supper": the *twelve* guests seated around the table are: 1) Katarina Ivanovna, 2) the landlady, 3) an old, almost blind man, 4) a shabby clerk, 5) a retired lieutenant, 6) another man, 7) a Polish gentleman, 8, 9) two other Polish gentlemen, 10) Polya, 11) Raskolnikov and 12) Sonia. Marmeladov's sacrificed body (13) provides both the testimony to and the advent of the Messiah, and the cornerstone of the new church (Simon/Peter) (Dostoevsky 1991, 395).

The alternative to the Petrine, self-colonial post-historicity (in effect, its negative) is this compensatory, Messianic opening (after the death of God), in which Russia will be hurled after history, "the Last Supper," since history itself will have ceased to exist and will be ready for an advent of a different mode of being.

This, in effect, is how the novel ends, with Raskolnikov, in Siberia, gazing at the vast space of Russia's pre-history, "as though the days of Abraham and his flocks had never passed" (Dostoevsky 1991, 628). But this pre-history brings about an acceleration of time

(alternative to the one experienced as modernization in the crime scene and the clock chiming half-past *seven*, "it must be fast") whereby "the seven years" ("seven years, *only* seven years," underlined by Dostoevsky) of Raskolnikov's imprisonment are experienced as the creationist, Biblical "seven days" (Dostoevsky 1991, 630). The Siberian gulag appears to Sonia and Raskolnikov as the site of happiness, "utmost happiness," (repeated several times), and one can only anticipate, with them, in the wake of this logocentric/*lager*centric ecstasy and its Messianic acceleration, "the great heroic deed that still" awaits Raskolnikov. "In place of dialectics life had arrived" (Dostoevsky 1991, 630), all mediation has ended, and the future is bright with Raskolnikov's "destining," and the ecstatic praising of the gulag. The two mutually exclusive "afters" coalesce into a devastating sacrificial chiasm: Russian Messianic sacrificiality meets the utmost danger or nihilation of technology, the massified mechanical processing of human bodies.

The rest, as they say, *is* (Russian) History. Dmitri Merezhkovsky in his *Prophet of the Russian Revolution* (1906) on Dostoevsky, thought of him as an ambivalent precursor of the Russian and by extension, the Soviet Revolution. Semyon Frank elaborated on the theme of this supplementary bond between Russian national identity and the Petrine modernization, caught in the nihilistic embrace, in his uncompromising essay "The Religious and Historical Meaning of the Russian Revolution" (1924): "The Russian revolution is the ultimate and popular expression of nihilism – the profound, originary Russian state of mind [...] and regardless of all differences, one should mention Peter the Great together with the contemporary Russian Bolshevism" (Frank 1992, 332). Nikolai Berdiaev went further in interpreting "Dostoevsky as a revolutionary [...] he is a socialist on the basis of Christian Orthodoxy, a socialist with Christ. He was building a theocratic utopia" in his "Origins and Meaning of Russian Communism" (1937) (Berdiaev 1990, 72). One should also mention the literal bringing "to life" of the figure of the dead God in the embalmed body of Lenin's mummy (a literal coupling of Messianism and Communism), which opens the happy horizon of the Russian/Soviet Messianic promise, its "bright future" (Stalin's "svetloe budushchee"), which dictates all "afters," "posts-," of this historical opening/closure. Lenin's mummy embodies that life when "all dialectics has ceased to exist," quite literally, in the eternal life *as* eternal death. The conclusion of this ideological construct can be found in Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962), in which the "utmost happiness" is brought about by the fact that the hero has had "his daily bread" in the Siberian concentration camp ("Solzhenitsyn was praising the communist bosses in a language that the communist bosses did not quite understand" [on khvalil nachal'stvo slovami nachal'stva neponiatnymi] Boris Groys once quipped to me). And for the more recent conclusion and endorsement of the Russian totalitarian/colonial phantasm and its symptoms, see Solzhenitsyn's "Kak nam obustroit' Rossiю" ("How Should We Rebuild Russia") published first in

the Soviet Union in the communist *Komsomolskaia pravda* (sic) in 1990 (or in his book, with an even more significant title, *How to Save Russia*). There he literally redraws the borders of Russia, again re-settles the Crimean Tatars and other nations, claims the southern, Muslim countries like Kazakhstan and others as Russian territory, playing Stalin, draws Russia into the "pre-," and suggests that her tribulations stem from the fact that Russians started building edifices taller than two stories, when they abandoned transportation in horse-drawn carriages, etc. (A proposition that would no doubt appeal to Martin Heidegger who, in the above-mentioned essay, juxtaposes the fond reminiscences of "the grandfather Bavarian forester," to the "monstrosity of modernity"). Russia's problems started, therefore, with her very entrance into modernity/history.

The End of Time, the Beginning of the Future

The ending of *Crime and Punishment* is "an end of a story." The novel ends, as a new beginning, "the beginning of a new story, the story of the gradual rebirth of a man. ... That might be the subject of a new story – our present story is ended" (Dostoevsky 1951, 559). After all religious and political constructs have been brought to their teleological, theological and metaphysical conclusion and destruction: both through the death of Raskolnikov qua German revolutionary (the reader of Kant, Hegel and Marx, "the German hatter") and the "resurrected" Raskolnikov, the Russian Christ, the new history can begin. *Crime and Punishment* is both a repository of the metaphysics and ideology of Russian nationalism (thus a possibility to read in Dostoevsky its religious, ideological or political limitations but sometimes also prophetic historical consequences), and *at the same time* a narrative that brings them to their annihilation and end. The new story was of course never written by Dostoevsky, remaining only a promise of the future. This promise, as formulated at the very end of *Crime and Punishment*, still retains certain Christic markers, such as the re-birth of the new man. However, the novels that followed, from the *Idiot* and *Devils* to *The Brothers Karamazov*, we know, told *nothing* about this, but if anything, even further radicalized the destruction and nihilation of all political and historico-religious constructs. Dostoevsky, in his career, never wrote a novel which would live up to this promise. Or, in its Christian, chiliastic aspirations, this promised novel was not possible *in this world* or it was bound to fail. All writings of Dostoevsky are captive of this failure, it constitutes their very narrative core. Inasmuch as the Christic chiliasm ends up in the sacrificial destruction of Christ, it unleashes the very nihilistic forces, hostile to life, His advent is meant to alleviate. Dostoevsky thus has to write and re-write, over and over again in order to avoid, and at the same time repeat this catastrophe.

Dostoevsky thus kept on writing, all the while repeating the urge to destroy the world as is, up and to the point of nothingness, replenishing his narratives, in Nietzsche's words of admiration for Dostoevsky in *Antichrist*, with "That queer and sick world into which the Gospels introduce us – as in a Russian novel, a world in which a scum of society, nervous disorders, and 'childlike' idiocy seem to be having a rendezvous. ... God – the deification of nothingness, the will to nothingness pronounced holy. ... God became the 'thing in itself'" (Nietzsche, 1982, 585, 603). In a word, Nietzsche saw in Dostoevsky the ultimate purveyor *and* destroyer of metaphysics in its religious or political reifications or emanations hostile to life. The supposed ecstatic bliss concluding *Crime and Punishment* celebrates the gulag as the fulfillment of "utmost happiness," announcing all the nihilistic urges of the Soviet Revolution, and rings hollow with desperation. Lev Shestov, the faithful chronologist of Dostoevsky's nihilism (through whom this version of Russian existentialism found its way to Paris where he worked as a professor of philosophy, and had as a student, among many others, Albert Camus), wrote in his *Dostoevsky and Nietzsche*: "Only that person decides to destroy who can no longer live otherwise. Dostoevsky went further in this direction than Count Tolstoy...." (Shestov 2007, 2)³.

That configuration in Dostoevsky, first recognized by Shestov and Nietzsche, is in some ways constitutive of the later tradition called "existentialist." Arguably, the *situation* of existentialism, and after, would not be possible without these radical nihilistic narratives signed by Fyodor Dostoevsky. Kirilov, who kills himself "in order to become God," will inspire Albert Camus and his *Sisyphus Myth*: "For Kirilov, as for Nietzsche, to kill God is to become God oneself; it is to realize on this earth the eternal life of which the Gospels speak" (Camus 1983, 104). Maurice Blanchot, in his classical work *The Space of Literature*, in the chapters "Kirilov" and "The Strange Project, or Double Death" in the same year as Camus, 1955, reflected on suicide as that which "retains the power of exceptional affirmation"; "Kirilov's suicide thus becomes the death of God" (Blanchot 1982, 97, 103). Dostoevsky's *Idiot*, in which Prince Myshkin recounts the death sentence deferred (a well-known episode from the life of Fyodor Dostoevsky himself which could not not have been appealing to Nietzsche: "Christianity is a metaphysics of a hangman," Nietzsche, 1982, 500), is formative of Blanchot's writing all the way to his *The Instant of My Death* (1994). In this story a character, the first person narrator, is sentenced to death and then pardoned, by the Russian, Vlasov troops in World War II, which reinforces the metonymical and associative chain with Dostoevsky and the experience, narrated by the "idiot" Prince Mysh-

³ For relationship between Dostoevsky, Nietzsche and Shestov, see the chapter in my *Vospalennyi iazyk* [Language/Tongue in Heat]. Moscow: Ad Marginem, 2003.

kin, of both finitude and eternity of the one sentenced to death: "He used to say that those five minutes seemed to him an eternity," (Dostoevsky 1992, 62). Blanchot's character experiences "The encounter of death with death. [...] As if the death outside him could only henceforth collide with the death in him. 'I am alive. No, you are dead'" (Blanchot, 2000, 5, 9). This story, in turn, inspired a commentary by Jacques Derrida, *Demeure. Fiction and Testimony*, in which he extends this experience into something like a counter-Heideggerian analytics of existence and being-towards-death, in that, as Derrida says, "I should be able to testify only to imminence of my death, to *its instance as deferred imminence*" (Derrida 2000, 46). The pages in *Nietzsche and Philosophy* in which Gilles Deleuze offers his powerful reflection on "The Overman: Against the Dialectic," could not have been written without an inspiration taken from the stories about Kirilov, Svidrigailov, Ivan Karamazov or Raskolnikov, which were first welcomed and celebrated by Friedrich Nietzsche who saw in "Dostoevsky, the only psychologist, incidentally, from whom I had something to learn, Dostoevsky, the profound human being" (Nietzsche 1982, 549). Kirilov's "If there is no God, then I am a god. I'm bound to shoot myself because the most important point of my self-will is to kill myself" (Dostoevsky, 1971, 612) made its way into Deleuze's reflection on "God becomes Man, Man becomes God. The death of God is a grand, noisy dialectical event; but an event which happens in the din of reactive forces and the fumes of nihilism" (Deleuze, 1983, 159).

However: Maybe there is *another* ending to this novel that has not been noticed or interpreted so far in the long history of Dostoevsky scholarship, but which a reflection on Russian existentialism, an attempt to "situate it," brings to the fore. This other ending takes place beyond or outside the historico-political destruction, or chiliastic, Christic, or as we shall see, Abrahamic, monotheistic, sacrificiality. This opening does not seem to belong to the history of metaphysical nihilation (the history of philosophy, the West, the Greek origins of the West qua the history of metaphysics – and let us not forget, that this history is combined, in Russia, with the history of Greek Orthodoxy), but *neither* does it to the history of Christic or Christian revelation. It opens up the possibility of another trajectory, already hinted at when, Raskolnikov, at the crossroads, asking for forgiveness, was mocked by the crowd earlier in the novel, as "going to Jerusalem." The air is still in these *deserted* expanses, as Raskolnikov ponders the future at the end of the novel (but before the very concluding words of the narrative cited above), and it appears to him not as a new beginning after the "end of history," but as an opening in the very future itself, *as if* "the age of Abraham and his flock had not passed" (Dostoevsky, 1951, 557). This end/beginning are, in a certain suspension of history and religion, in their *fictionality*, being *as if* literary. In a radical reversal of temporality, the future happens as if the whole biblical tradition, as if the entire history is yet to come. But that future, in the tranquility of this desert, cannot be the

future that *presents* itself, but only a promise or a testimony of the future to-come, a welcome on the other side or beyond all the historico-political or sacrificial nihilation and mutilation, but in the name of an impossible immemorial testimony, not as a *revelation* but as their *revaluation*. The future to come, in this desert before the desert, announces itself *before the sacrificial obligation* took place, a place where Abraham appears as a welcoming figure, in the figure of the shepherd (and why not assume, also, a certain shepherd of Being), *but of the shepherd of being – otherwise, and otherwise than being*. We will not rush to call this opening towards the other "Jewish" or Judaic (with which it has, though, at the very least, some affinities), since this opening exists even before the sacrificial obligation that bound Abraham and Isaac, an opening that has as yet to coalesce *either* in the history of religion *or* in the history of Being. It opens up a space, to use the words and analysis of Jacques Derrida in his essay "Faith and Knowledge," of "the immemoriality of a desert in the desert of which it is neither a threshold nor a mourning" (Derrida, 2002, 59). But if there is something "Jewish" in this ending (and if it existed, it would be against Dostoevsky's ideology or the explicit anti-Semitic ideology of some of his characters and against his own "intentions")⁴, it appears in the sense that Derrida gave to the figure of Elijah in his essay on Joyce's *Ulysses*, no doubt following the profound message of Levinas: Ulysses, the one who returns, and Abraham, the one who leaves and never returns. This Other, yet to come, Derrida says in "Ulysses Gramophone," "one can always call Elijah, if Elijah is the name of the unforeseeable other for whom a place must be kept" (Derrida 1995, 295). Elijah is the one who prevents the closure and dis- or re-orientes the coming back of a historico-political trajectory, or the history of Being, or the testamentary teleology of the Revelation, what is a "Greek" (Ulysses) return in the West back to itself, but jolts it to a futurity without discerning destination, or without a discerning destining of Being. Raskolnikov in this alternative trajectory does not come to a destination, but is re-sent to another geography beyond geography which is *neither* Russian, *nor* that of the West, he is sent to a desert to wander in the expectation of an immemorial arrival of an un-programmed event for which the language, or the narrative about it, as of yet, does not exist: as Dostoevsky says in the last sentence of the novel, it is a story yet to be written. What this scene allows us to reflect, is precisely the outbidding of the two sources of the religious and ontological of which Derrida speaks in "The Two Sources of 'Religion'," as if he were describing the "desert in the desert" with which Dostoevsky ends his novel (but ends, as has been said, with two

⁴ For Dostoevsky's anti-Semitism see the seminal work by David I. Goldstein, *Dostoevsky and the Jews*, with forward by Joseph Frank. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

contradictory and mutually exclusive endings, an aporetic tension between the event and its revelation, and the possibility of its repetition and revealability).

In his *Time and the Other*, at the very moment when he attempts to reorient the ontology of Martin Heidegger "towards the original significance of ethics," Emmanuel Levinas quotes Dostoevsky's dictum from *The Devils*, "Everyone is guilty, and I am the most guilty of all," and reflects how "the obligation with regard to the Other is also infinite" (Levinas 1987, 108, 109). The Abraham and his flocks in *Crime and Punishment* resembles, rather, "Abram, who leaves his ancestral home for good, who never returns and never arrives at his destination, who encounters and is subject to the absolute alterity of God, who overthrows the idols and is transformed to become his better self, Abraham" (Levinas, 1987, 24). This other Raskolnikov's trajectory operates, then, beyond geography, *in the desert and diaspora*, among *the nomads, completely different, other people, living in freedom*, "Там была свобода и жили другие люди, совсем не похожие на здешних" (Kindle Edition), as the novel says, and complicates the attempt to *situate* Russian existentialism, inasmuch as (Russian) existentialism opens itself up to the advent of ethics and the destinerant other. *In situating Russian existentialism, we have come to the border of its otherness, to an absolute alterity located in its very heart.*

Dostoevsky situates Raskolnikov at the border of an event to come, *a-venir*, to use Derrida's formulation. As Raskolnikov "thinks of *nothing*" at the borders of this desert another, non-violent, non-sacrificial, space/time opens, the space time before all space time after the end of history (and simultaneously *before* it), a different revolution and revelation of Being and *time, a repetition as affirmation of a source without an origin or a model, an ethics without a sacrifice of the other, as if* the days of Abraham and his flock had not passed. Is this something possible *only* in or *as* literature, is this an event that is possible *only* as an *as if*, as literature written *otherwise*, by and for *completely different people*, only yet to come? And if possible in life, then only as a work of art, an *oeuvre*? Maybe. That would be the beginning of another story or another essay, about the different nothing at work in the promise of literature, or in the heart of its secret. That might be the subject of a new story – our present story is ended.

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Note: English translations of Russian texts were used whenever available. All other translations from Russian are mine.

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